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**Citation for published version:**

March, L 2012, 'Nationalism for Export? The Domestic and Foreign-Policy Implications of the New 'Russian Idea'', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 64, no. 3, pp. 401-425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.661927>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/09668136.2012.661927](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.661927)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Europe-Asia Studies

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© March, L. (2012). Nationalism for Export? The Domestic and Foreign-Policy Implications of the New 'Russian Idea'. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64(3), 401-425. 10.1080/09668136.2012.661927

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## **Nationalism for Export? The Domestic and Foreign-Policy Implications of the new 'Russian Idea'**

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### **Abstract:**

*Focusing on diverse state approaches to nationalism provides a more nuanced view than that of Russian domestic and foreign policies driven directly by revanchist nationalism. The Russian authorities' 'official nationality' is moderate in aspiration. However, the effect is less benign because the Kremlin both mobilises extreme nationalism for regime goals and suppresses it when it becomes destabilising. This approach prevents nationalism either of extreme or moderate orientation becoming an influential, independent force in Russian politics. Such conflicting imperatives make Russia a more unpredictable international partner than if its policies were founded on a consistent ideological nationalism.*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Has Russia really ‘gone nationalist’, as one analyst foretold a dozen years ago (Allensworth 1998)? It is certainly an unquestioned assumption of much academic and journalistic coverage that contemporary Russia is beset by a rising tide of aggressive nationalism that affects both domestic and foreign politics. For example, attention focuses on the marked increase in xenophobic and chauvinistic public sentiments (especially increased support for the slogan ‘Russia for the [ethnic] Russians’), the rise of racially-motivated violence on Russian city streets and the prominence of Russian nationalist thinkers and anti-Western sentiment in Russia’s domestic discourse. Increasingly, an ‘assertive’, perhaps ‘neo-imperial’ foreign policy appears inextricably linked with anti-foreigner sentiments (for example against Georgians in 2006 and Estonians in 2007) and increasingly challenges the Euro-Atlantic community (E.g. Smith 2005; Gomart 2006; Joo 2008; Varga 2008; Clover 2008).

So, are there any grounds to challenge Edward Lucas’ view that the ‘ideological conflict of the New Cold War is between lawless Russian nationalism and law-governed Western multilateralism’ (Lucas 2008, p. 14)? Indeed, many analysts would point to the doctrine of ‘sovereign democracy’ promulgated by the Kremlin (above all in 2005-8) as expressly designed to legitimate such a newly assertive proclamation of unique Russian values alongside attempts to discredit Western values and institutions (e.g. Popescu 2006). A subtext of such pre-occupations is the Weimar Russia scenario: the idea that former president Vladimir Putin transformed semi-democratic Russia into ‘a harsh brand of authoritarianism with some fascist features’ (Hassner 2008, p. 7).

Nevertheless, this view of Russia as obviously nationalistic and proto-fascistic is certainly contested, and not just by Kremlin spin-doctors who ritually rebut Western criticism as cold-war Russophobia. First, several analysts doubt whether the Russian elite even has a consistent ideology, nationalistic or otherwise (e.g. Trenin 2007a; Evans, Jr. 2008). Second, some see the nationalism of the Russian elite as a relatively civic, even ‘liberal’ kind that is probably the most moderate version currently possible given the tragicomic demise of contemporary Russian liberalism (e.g. Prozorov 2005; Bacon 2006; Sakwa 2008b/c). Third, the Russian nationalist ‘threat’ has been used as a phantom by Russian and Western elites alike for self-serving reasons: the political and electoral record of all nationalists after Vladimir Zhirinovskii’s shock victory in the Duma elections of 1993 has actually been consistently very poor (Lieven 1999); what is therefore surprising is the *weakness* rather than the strength of Russian nationalism. Since 2008,

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<sup>1</sup> This research was funded by ESRC grant no. RES-181-25-0020. Many thanks are due to Jonathan Hearn, Jimmy Kennedy, Marlène Laruelle and Alexander Verkhovsky for comments on earlier versions.

president Dmitrii Medvedev's accent on modernisation and his apparently pragmatic 'liberal' stance promoting the US-Russia 'reset' adds further complications to viewing Russia as inherently nationalistic.

How can such diverse interpretations be bridged? A principal reason for the diversity is simply that many analysts look at discrete elements of Russian nationalism (e.g. xenophobic public sentiments, nationalist philosophy, and Kremlin pronouncements) but rarely explicitly investigate their interaction. This article aims to take a more holistic view that focuses on how state approaches to nationalism interact with public sentiments and affect Russia's domestic and foreign policies. I will argue that the Russian authorities' nationalism (which I call 'official nationality') is moderate *in its content* relative to historical and contemporary forms of Russian nationalism. This is because its aim is not the expression of nationalism *per se*, but its control and utilisation for regime goals. However, the *effect* of official nationality is far less benign than its content because of contradictions inherent in its political utilisation: the regime takes a profoundly administrative approach that is far less post-Soviet than the content of its nationalism, and its approach to extreme nationalism is ambiguous and inconsistent. On one hand, the Kremlin periodically co-opts and mobilises nationalism (even extreme forms); on the other, it repeatedly suppresses nationalism when its political implications become destabilising. Such an approach prevents nationalism either of extreme or moderate orientation becoming an influential, independent force in Russian politics, for good or for ill. So to a large degree, the Russian elite is a prisoner of its own methods: although Medvedev has made counteracting extreme nationalism ever more a priority, the Kremlin's past record at creating nationalist demands that it then has to suppress indicates that such efforts may be primed for failure.

The Kremlin's official nationality has several implications. Although the Russian elite is often accused of neo-Soviet methods, official nationality is avowedly post-Soviet in content, even if its aims and methods are more traditional to Soviet or even Tsarist practice. Western concerns over an imminent 'New Cold War' prompted by value competition between an authoritarian, nationalist Russian 'sovereign democracy' and Western liberal democracy were dramatic oversimplifications: such a clash of civilisations remains very unlikely. Most 'nationalist' rhetoric appears to be primarily for domestic use. Moreover, the Russian elite is deeply schizophrenic about it, since if nationalism becomes too autonomous or dynamic, this threatens both its domestic authority and its room for manoeuvre abroad (particularly in pursuing a 'pragmatic' policy of economic modernisation). As such, Russian nationalism is arguably a bigger threat to the Russian elite than to the West. Nevertheless, the Russian elite lacks a consistent alternative legitimating ideology apart from nationalism, which increases temptations to 'ride the nationalist tiger'. Such conflicting imperatives may continue to make Russia a trickier and certainly more unpredictable international partner than if its policies were founded on a consistent ideological nationalism.

### **The three faces of Russian nationalism: official, cultural and political**

Three analytically distinct (but in practice somewhat overlapping) conceptions are used here to delineate aspects of Russian nationalism: *official nationality* represents state approaches, discourses and ideology outlined in Kremlin statements, presidential addresses, and foreign policy doctrines. This has strong functional continuities with the 'official nationality' practised in Tsarist Russia from the 1830s (cf. Riasanovsky 1959). The division between *cultural nationalism* and *political nationalism* is one outlined by John Hutchinson (1994). The goal of cultural nationalism is defence and activation of the historical community; Russian cultural nationalism is principally the mainstream intellectual and media discourse and symbols that aim to reinforce the historical, moral and social aspects of a distinct Russian 'national' way of life and thereby build a sense of national solidarity; political nationalism is simply nationalism explicitly aimed at capturing political institutions for the 'nation', i.e. electoral and social mobilisation around nationalist motifs.

These three aspects are not autonomous: the state actively shapes the relationship between them as part of what might be called 'managed nationalism'. Broadly speaking, official nationality sets down the parameters for the cultural and political sphere which are allowed some autonomy within (and even, occasionally, beyond) these limits as long as they do not fundamentally challenge it. Indeed, as we will see, cultural nationalism's emphasis on a unique Russian 'civilisation' conflicts with the European emphasis of official nationalism. However political nationalism is more rigorously controlled, since the authorities continually attempt to co-opt or prevent non-sanctioned nationalist mobilisation.

The focus of this article is unavoidably state-centric. This is not to argue that all Russian nationalism is state-created, nor to ignore bottom-up, 'objective' socio-economic factors that have driven an increase in ethnic Russian nationalist sentiment. For example, Russia's dramatic economic turnaround since 2000 and increasing political stability underpins a renewed search for both an agreed national identity and enhanced international status.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, ethnic Russians have moved from being a 52-per cent bare majority in the internationalist, multinational Soviet state to an 80-per cent predominance in the Russian Federation, which has naturally boosted national and cultural re-assertion. However, given the projected demographic decline of ethnic Russians relative to the domestic Muslim population and an increasing influx of labour migrants, a reassertion of ethnic self-awareness that is arguably a necessary stage of Russia's adaptation from empire to nation-state has developed potentially inflammatory consequences. Given the

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed discussion see *Russia Profile*, 4:7, August-September 2007.

unregulated legal framework for immigrants, particularly a lack of integration programmes, the soil for popular xenophobic statements is fertile indeed (Dubas 2008).

‘Managed nationalism’ is simply a subset of ‘managed pluralism’ – the way an ‘electoral authoritarian’ regime sets the agenda for ‘healthy’ socio-political competition and stigmatises those outside its ‘imposed consensus’ (Gel’man 2002; Balzer 2003). Edwin Bacon further qualifies this process as ‘snatch-squad authoritarianism’, whereby the regime does not aim to eliminate pluralism, but periodically intervenes to remove ‘ringleaders’ and ‘trouble-makers’ before organised anti-regime opposition emerges (Bacon 2003). Similarly ‘managed nationalism’ permits forms of nationalism that do not fundamentally challenge the authoritarian state, which gives an inbuilt advantage to illiberal and even extremist forms, but tends to be inimical to any truly liberal nationalism that critiques this authoritarian state.

### **‘Official nationality’ – the national idea as ideology**

Does the Russian state have an ideology, let alone a nationalist one? Many would disagree. A state ideology is unconstitutional in Russia, and key elite figures including Putin and Medvedev have spoken against the imposition of such an ideology ‘in any form’ (e.g. Putin 2000, p. 213). As a legacy of Marxism-Leninism, there has been a widespread reaction against inflexible and constraining dogmas – what Putin (2000, p. 181) called communist ‘ideological “roaches.”’ Communism collapsed at a time when the Russian elite had no clear vision of a new political system: communism and fascism were discredited, and the skin-deep adherence to liberal democracy was also profoundly shaken in the 1990s; instead, the replacement of any coherent ideology by ‘pragmatism’ (and in foreign policy, the pragmatism of ‘national interests’) has been one of the key features of the regime (Shevtsova 2007). As Stephen Hanson argues, in 1990s Russia there was an ‘end of ideology’, where appeal to ideological principle was almost impossible (Hanson 2003). According to many, Russia is a *Russia Inc.* of profits and pragmatism – one of the ‘least ideological countries in the world’ where (financial) interests reign supreme and ideas barely matter (Trenin 2007a, 2007b, p. 95).

Nevertheless, the regime itself has an ambivalent, but increasingly positive attitude to ideology. According to Okara (2007), the lack of a grand systemic project for Russia’s transformation is one of Russia’s key contemporary problems, since strictly pragmatic motivations or emphases on stability cannot ensure social mobilisation or cohesion. Vladimir Shlapentokh (2008) argues that the Russian elite are acutely aware that they are ideologically ‘naked’ before their own population and the world, prompting a lack of confidence in their own legitimacy and a quest for ideas to

motivate and consolidate the population. Hence the increasing emphasis from 1996 onwards on the search for a 'national idea', which, although articulated by the state, allegedly emanates from the populace as a whole rather than the political elite, and provides orientation and values to fill the post-Leninist ideological vacuum without the strict prescriptions and proscriptions of the former 'state religion'.

Certainly, this 'national idea' is inconsistent and contested: the 'Kremlin' is a group of factions, not a monolithic entity, and the emergent national idea (as we shall see) contains numerous inconsistencies. Symptomatically, it has been associated with number of labels, depending on time, audience and context, from 'conservatism', 'centrism', 'managed democracy' to 'sovereign democracy'. Nevertheless, at the core of this 'national idea' is an increasingly consistent world-view and set of assumptions (Evans, Jr. 2008). Since intellectual consistency is necessary for political philosophies but not ideologies (Freedman 1998, p. 39), it is increasingly convincing to view the national idea as 'something close to an ideology' (Duncan 2007, p. 139). Furthermore, this emergent national idea is an ideology in the Marxian/Gramscian sense of providing legitimacy for ruling class power and hegemony (particularly in terms of providing a set of 'everyday' and 'commonsense' popular assumptions) and in the Western political science sense of providing a broad set of inter-related ideas that structure political discourse and action, explain how society is and should be, particularly (as we shall see), since these ideas are increasingly transmitted through state symbols, the state-run media, education, and through the dominant pro-Kremlin 'party of power' United Russia. Certainly, the 'national idea' is often adapted to political conjuncture with an opportunism bordering on cynicism (Kozhevnikova 2004), but this in itself can be seen as a continuation of Leninist political praxis.

What then are the core assumptions of the national idea? However labelled, the consistent themes since 2000 are re-formulations of those first found in Putin's 'Millennium Manifesto' (Putin 2000): an emphasis on a distinct Russian modernisation project which draws its inspiration from Russia's 1000-year old traditions. Essentially this is a Russian moderate conservatism, with themes such as defence of tradition and organic society being instantly recognisable from Western conservatism. Even its 'non-ideological' nature is a common feature of conservatism, which tends to spurn ideology in favour of arguments related to pragmatism, experience and history. Moreover, the emphasis on cultural, moral and spiritual values, patriotism and statehood shows the common affinity between nationalism and conservatism. It can be regarded as a 'moderate' conservatism because, although Putin has drawn on a wide range of sources (including notably in one presidential address, Franklin Roosevelt's 'New Deal'), the greatest intellectual influence appears to be from so-called 'liberal' conservatives of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of a conscious adherence to a non-communist intellectual tradition – figures such as Witte, Struve, Klyuchevskii, as well as Dmitrii Likhachev (Sakwa 2008b, Bacon 2006). Also influential are 'White' anti-communist conservatives such as

Ivan Il'in, Nikolai Berdyaev and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who emphasise Russia's spiritual and cultural continuity and uniqueness. According to some, 'Slavophile' conservative nationalist emphases are apparent in Putin's accent on civic solidarity, culture as an organism for nation-building and ideology, and education and science as creative forces preventing social and military conflicts (Okara 2007). However, there is little of Slavophilism's nostalgic anti-modernism and anti-liberalism. But to call this 'liberal conservatism' as does Sakwa (2008b/c) goes too far: certainly the role of the individual and human rights is accepted, as are constitutionalism and economic liberalism, but there is little approval of the liberal philosophy underpinning this. Putin's often-quoted phrase that Russia 'will not become a second edition of...the U.S. or Britain, where liberal values have deep historic traditions' (2000, p. 14) can be understood as implying that a liberal and strong state are antitheses, and at the very least equivocates about liberalism's value to Russia. Evans' view that Putin's world-view is illiberal rather than anti-liberal seems apt (Evans, Jr. 2008).

*The modern triad of official nationality: 'Autocracy', Sovereignty, Nationality*

To some, Putin's 'national idea' has profound similarities to Tsarist 'Official Nationality', as expressed by Count Uvarov's famous triad of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality' under Tsar Nikolai I (Okara 2007; Lucas 2008). The implication is that this is largely a reactionary nationalism masquerading as modernity, or as Angela Stent argues (2008, p. 1092) Putin's Russia resembles 'a twenty-first century version of the Tsarist patrimonial state.' Dividing contemporary Official Nationality into a triad is obvious simplification, particularly since Putin and Medvedev tend to cite Tsars Peter, Aleksandrs I and II not Nikolai I, but it does help isolate the continuities and changes in the current national idea.

I argue that the similarity is profoundly in function and not content: contemporary official nationality is far more modern, moderate, secular, and indeed less autocratic than previous versions. However, it plays functionally the same role not of expressing nationalism, but monopolising it and channelling it in the interest of the autocratic state. After all, originally Uvarov's triad arose to counteract the revolutionary slogans of *Liberté, Egalité et Fraternité* by co-opting nationalism in service of state and Tsar and thereby imposing unity and stability over the Russian empire (Riasanovsky 1959, p. 74). As is well known, there were similar reflexes at work in the USSR under Stalin and Brezhnev, with the co-option of the emotional appeal of Russian nationalism to supplement the rational, scientific arguments of Marxism-Leninism (e.g. Mitrokhin 2003). The principle was the same: the adoption of select Russian nationalist symbols and traditions once they had been rendered politically harmless (Vujacic 2007). The cultural values



of the dominant imperial nation (the Russian language, Orthodoxy) were adopted as a 'state-forming' nation, but non-sanctioned forms of Russian nationalism (e.g. the Slavophiles, Solzhenitsyn) were periodically severely punished.

*Autocracy:* Several authors have explicitly described contemporary Russia as a path-dependent evolution of traditional Russian autocracy, whereby the state is the personal patrimony (*votchina*) of the Tsar-President (e.g. Blank 2008, p. 234; McFaul and Stoner-Weiss 2008; van Zon 2008). This is an exaggeration: Russian autocracy (*samoderzhavie*) always indicated the untrammelled rule of a single individual answerable to no one but God. Nikolai I's Russia was a police-state where all were compelled to obey the monarch and Uvarov's triad became a banner to rally the nation (Riasanovsky 1959, p. 78).

Moreover, Nikolai I saw constitutional monarchy as a 'lie' (Ibid., p. 104). However, the contemporary Russian state (in accordance with the Constitution's Article One) is a 'democratic federative law-based state' (*demokraticeskoe federativnoe pravovoe gosudarstvo*) and not a *samoderzhavie*, and only a few members of the elite vocalise publicly their predilection for 'autocratic self-government' (*samoderzhavnoe samoupravlenie*) (Tret'yakov 2007, p. 93). Russian democratic constitutionalism is very weak, despite becoming a mantra of presidential addresses. However, it is far from irrelevant, as the 2008 constitutionally-mandated handover of power from Putin to Medvedev indicated. Indeed, the post-2008 'tandemocracy' between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin involves a *potential* sharing of state power unprecedented in Russian history. Furthermore, Medvedev (2008) has explicitly criticised 'the cult of the state and the alleged wisdom of the administrative apparatus' in terms no Tsar would use.

The post-2008 diarchy implies that the concept of 'autocracy' is no longer relevant. Yet it does still makes sense to talk of Russia's autocratic tendencies, if no longer its fully autocratic state – not least because Medvedev's much-touted 'liberal' rhetoric remains to be translated into substantive action, and above all because he has still not become a political figure autonomous of Putin. As Andrei Ryabov (2008, p. 4) argues: 'the transition from presidential monocentrism to tandemocracy did not change the nature of the political regime...which...remains personalistic.'

Moreover, there are clear contemporary legacies tracing from Tsarist autocracy, not least Putin's daily governing style and mini-cult (see below). More significant still is the continued emphasis on Russian 'stateness' or *raison d'état* (*gosudarstvennichestvo/gosudarstvennost'*) whereby the state possesses a spiritual, sacred quality as the distillation of Russia's 'collective will', and is not (fundamentally) limited by any earthly power. Putin's axiom that the 'centralised state is... practically in Russia's DNA' is often quoted (Putin 2000, p. 86). The first line of Russia's (post-2000) national anthem puts it as succinctly: *Rossiia – svyashchennaya nasha derzhava* ('Russia — our sacred Great Power'). In this telling, the Russian state is truly autocratic: the principal and unhindered agent of Russia's '1000-year history of statehood'. In international relations, the search for 'Great Power status' (*derzhavnost'/derzhavnichestvo*) is

almost a national mission. Similarly, the autocratic tradition of the state remaining above class and party is preserved. The authorities preserve their autonomy vis-à-vis political constraints and a quasi-Soviet 'leading and guiding role' in managed pluralism: for instance the President remains the primary guarantor of the constitution (not the constitutional court) and the Prime Minister can 'lead' the United Russia party without being a member of it.

Moreover, as in the past, the state (*gosudarstvo*) is far more central to the discourse of contemporary nationality than people (*narod*), still less nation (*natsiya*). In this way official nationality is only quasi-nationalistic, and as under Stalin this is 'Russo-centric etatism' rather than Russian nationalism (Brandenburger 1999). Indeed, even when the word *natsiya* appears officially, it is conceptualised in civic rather than ethnic terms: *Rossiiskaya natsiya* (nation of Russian citizens) not *Russkaya natsiya* (ethnic Russian nation). This is not to deny that Putin was more Russocentric and careless with his use of the word *russkii* in his early presidency, but there appears to have been latterly a conscious effort to excise this word from official use in deference to Russia's multi-nationality – for Putin and Medvedev, the 'Russian idea' is *Rossiiskaya*, not *Russkaya*.

The subordination of nationalism to statism is a notable feature of contemporary Russian foreign policy doctrine too, which, as many have outlined, envisages a Hobbesian competition between states as the primary actors, operating according to 'national interests' defined by the state and not the nation as such (e.g. Lo 2006). Official nationality was traditionally concerned more with internal state unity and stability than foreign policy, and its exponents regarded the expansionist sentiments of nationalists like the pan-Slavists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as subversive (Duncan 2000). Indeed, as Astrid Tuminez argues, Russian foreign policy makers have traditionally tried to preserve their autonomy from Russian nationalist sentiment exactly as they do in domestic policy – nationalism has 'rarely and briefly' impacted on foreign policy, and then only in the service of state interests (Tuminez 2000, p. 6). Putin's 2001-3 'Westward tilt' and the new 'reset', which disgust many genuine Russian nationalists, are recent examples of the primacy of *étatisme* over nationalist sentiment.

*Sovereignty*: 'Sovereign democracy' has been one of the most-discussed aspects of 'the national idea'. In content, it is little more than a detailed distillation of familiar themes (Russia's 1993 Constitutional Preamble refers to 'sovereign statehood') that supplement and reinforce the above-noted desire for the domestic and international autonomy of the (autocratic) state. Yet the balance between its core terms has been controversial. Its vagueness and the fact that (directly contrary to its intention) it drew increased international attention to Russia's democracy deficit has meant it has now been downgraded: Medvedev criticised the term and always refers to Russia as a democracy, period (e.g. Svanidze and Svanidze, 2008, pp. 19-21). Yet it has not been abandoned: in 2011 it remained inscribed in United

Russia's 'programme declaration', while Medvedev's July 2008 foreign policy doctrine even decried attempts to 'lower the role of the sovereign state in international relations' (*Kontseptsiya* 2008).

The author of sovereign democracy Vladislav Surkov argues that it is a way of re-planting democracy in Russian political culture after the cataclysmic 1990s – when *demokratiya* became *dermokratiya* (crapocracy), perceived as a Western import without any domestic legitimacy. It allegedly does not involve negating universal practices, but simply allows Russia to find its own path to democracy (*Suverenitet* 2006; *Suverennaya demokratiya* 2007; *Pro suverennuyu demokratiyu* 2007). Surkov argues that there are recognisably national models of democracy in France, Britain and Germany, all with a mix of the universal and specific.

Critics of sovereign democracy argue that it is precisely an attempt to negate universal principles, to limit the influx of Western liberal ideas and practices and in general rebut outside interference in Russia's political system, and that it arose in direct response to the threat of 'coloured revolutions' in 2003-4 -- universally portrayed in Russia as the result of Western 'revolution-for-export' rather than domestic revolts (e.g. Popescu 2006). The critics have a powerful case here, particularly since sovereign democracy was formulated in parallel with well-documented measures such as legal restrictions on NGOs, the limiting of foreign election observers and sustained Russian rhetoric about Western democratic 'double standards'. However, although sovereign democracy marks a move from hard to soft power and an attempt to make the Russian model of 'democracy' more attractive in response to the 'coloured virus', whether it marks an attempt to subvert the Western democratisation agenda more consistently and provide the ideological basis for a new 'authoritarian international' may be doubted, particularly since Russia's new 'democracy promotion' NGO, the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation registered in New York and Paris in January 2008, developed only gradually over the following three years.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, sovereign democracy is not really a theory of democracy at all – it should rather be called democratic sovereignty, or even just sovereignty. Robert Amsterdam rightly observes that it is 'sovereign, perhaps, but democratic? Not even close' (Amsterdam 2006). The integrity of Russian democracy is simply stipulated as an unarguable fact and little concrete is proposed either as to how Russian democracy might develop or how *specifically* it differs from liberal democracy. Where this is intimated at all it becomes clear that Russian democracy is envisaged as a Rousseauian plebiscitary democracy. As Ivan Krastev (2007) notes, the chief intellectual origins are Francois Guizot and Carl Schmitt, who emphasised 'decisionism' – anti-revolutionism, anti-populism and anti-pluralism; the 'sovereign' is neither the people nor voters, but reason embodied in consensus of responsible national elites. From a different ideological perspective, and with different emphases, we have just another justification for Russian

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<sup>3</sup> See the website at <http://www.indemco.org/>.

*gosudarstvennost'*. The Russian state is portrayed as being legitimate and democratic because it is an accurate reflection of the *volonté générale*. Such a conception lacks Aristotle's principle that popular consent is no decisive indication of democracy: mere majority rule is tyranny because it does not permit any change of ruler. Moreover, sovereign democracy depoliticises the Russian state, and reinforces the above-noted preference for the state to be accorded an autonomous, supra-political role. Sovereignty is seen as both *internal*: the right of a state to govern its own people according to their (state-defined) interests and *external*: the right of a state to conduct an independent foreign policy in defence of its own national interests. Much of the discussion of sovereignty is explicitly about maintaining economic competitiveness on the world arena, with both Putin and Surkov declaring that Russia's national interests are economic modernisation and competitiveness (e.g. Surkov 2006).

What results is schizophrenic. On one hand, Russia is eager to be recognised as a normal country meeting world standards of democracy but having its own sovereign sphere (rather like the US, despite being 'European'). The illiberal and 'nationalistic' emphasis is implicit rather than explicit: sovereign democracy refers to Western political rationalism and economic expediency rather than traditional Russophile arguments about cultural specificity, spirituality or tradition. Be that as it may, sovereign democracy places heavy reliance on the rhetoric of exceptionalism, and a generally favourable reaction from true nationalists like Aleksandr Prokhanov indicates that it can be presented as simply an alternative argument for a Russian *Sonderweg* (cf. Makarychev 2008).

*Nationality*. Nationality (*Narodnost'*) was always the most controversial element of Uvarov's triad, subordinate to the imperatives of Orthodoxy and Autocracy (Westwood 2002). Contemporary official nationality expounds a relatively clear, moderate, pro-European nationalism, which, however, conflicts with the above-noted emphasis on the primacy of the state, and, as explored below, is further undermined by the markedly more anti-Western cultural nationalism expounded by pro-Kremlin media.

In the Kremlin's repeated telling, Russia is unambiguously a European state and part of European civilisation, albeit the emphasis on sovereignty indicates a desire to be 'part of Europe but apart from Europe' with a view of an illiberal 'greater Europe' that many EU states would not themselves recognise.<sup>4</sup> However, Russia declares itself unwilling to pursue any kind of explicit messianic ideological project or to propound a 'clash of civilisations'. Contrary to some interpretations (e.g. Umland 2002; Smith 2005) there is little direct influence of Eurasianism as a doctrine. Marlène Laruelle argues that the Kremlin rarely uses 'Eurasian' as a term (it prefers 'Euro-Asian'): absent is the influence of 'Russian civilisation', determinist geopolitics, imperial expansion and inevitable conflict with the West

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<sup>4</sup> Exactly as first argued by Baranovsky (2000).

evident in the thought of prominent neo-Eurasianists such as Aleksandr Dugin (Laruelle 2008).<sup>5</sup> It is not clear that this is even a 'pragmatic Eurasianism' (Sakwa 2008c, p. 269), rather than just pragmatism – a recognition that Russia has a multi-vector foreign policy with interests in both Europe and Asia.

What is the most fundamental break from Tsarist 'official nationality' is that the view of nationality proffered is profoundly secular – Russian Orthodoxy is not part of the contemporary triad. The Church does not figure in foreign policy concepts, Presidential state of the nation-addresses or (explicitly) in the concept of sovereign democracy. In principle, the national idea is profoundly multi-national and multi-confessional. This is not to deny that the Russian Orthodox Church is 'first among equals' in relation to Russia's other traditional religions, both in the 1997 Law on Religions and repeated elite statements that refer to its unique role in defending Russian statehood throughout history, to a degree that may be unconstitutional.

Ultimately, however, although there may be individuals in the Kremlin and Church hierarchy who dream of an Orthodox Empire, and, as outlined below, the Church often actively supports state initiatives, rapprochement between Church and State falls a long-way short of the Tsarist 'symphonic ideal' of a fusion of secular and religious power, or the nationalist idea of a 'Third Rome' exercising its civilizing mission against the decadent West. According to Aleksandr Verkhovsky (2006), despite personal strong Orthodox convictions, both Putin (and Medvedev) oppose too close liaison between Church and state, and repeatedly emphasise a 'spiritual', not confessional, state identity, whilst insisting on secularism and the need for freedom of conscience. Moreover the Orthodox Church itself does not want to regain a position of total dependence on the state. Unsurprisingly, after Patriarch Kirill's inauguration in January 2009 his definition of 'symphony' between Church and state involved mutual non-interference and respect for democratic, constitutional principles, with the Church concentrating on the heavenly, rather than the earthly realm.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the indirect influence of the Church on state has continued to grow.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, increasing Kremlin attention to Russia's other 'traditional religions' has received less coverage by Western analysts. Most notably, the state has increasingly addressed the needs of Russian Islam. In Malaysia in 2003,

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<sup>5</sup> On one of the few occasions when Putin talked about Russia's 'civilising mission in Eurasia', he explicitly associated it with the spread of democratic values (2005 state-of-the-nation address, cited in Chadaev, 2005, p. 205).

<sup>6</sup> 'Patriarkh Kirill prizval Tserkov' i gosudarstvo k vzaimodeistviyu', available at: [http://www.newsru.com/religy/02feb2009/kirche\\_staad\\_print.html](http://www.newsru.com/religy/02feb2009/kirche_staad_print.html), accessed 6 February 2009.

<sup>7</sup> An example is the appointment of several prominent Church lobbyists to the Justice Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis (which monitors registered religious organisations) in April 2009. See Verkhovsky (2009).

Putin stated that Russia was a ‘Muslim power’, and Russia even joined the Organisation of Islamic Conference (as observer) in 2005. Whilst such initiatives had little impact on the daily life of Russia’s Muslims, they were regarded by many as immensely symbolic gestures that neither Tsarist Russia nor the USSR could ever conceivably have undertaken. Whilst it is possible to portray such decisions as driven by Eurasianism, they also have clearly pragmatic motives: namely greater attention to fostering the loyalty of Muslims to the Russian state after the Chechen wars and 9/11. Similarly, Putin unambiguously rejects the anti-Semitism that has traditionally been the *lingua franca* of extreme Russian nationalism (Shlapentokh 2008). While it is true that Putin has never criticized the anti-Semitic tirades of his close ally Ahmadi-nejad, the logic of sovereign democracy implies that commenting on partners’ domestic policies is simply not Russia’s practice.

The repeated emphasis on Russian’s multi-confessional and multi-ethnic nature should not obscure that official nationality is at times prone to Russocentrism. For instance, a number of draft laws promulgated by the United Russia party concerning Russian language and culture have incited opposition because of their emphasis on Russians as the ‘state-forming’ nation, an uncomfortable echo of their Soviet-era status as benign elder brother in the communist fraternity. Yet, the protracted legislative process indicates intra-elite opposition. For example, a draft law on ‘state ethnic policy’ has not been adopted and a similar concept later mooted within the government was abandoned after apparent resistance from leaders of the ‘national republics’.<sup>8</sup>

So all in all, contemporary Russian ‘official nationality’ has strong continuities with the Tsarist and Soviet past: it is a conservative nationalism that venerates, justifies and is subordinate to state interests. Similarly, contemporary official nationality is primarily focussed on achieving internal stability and order through inculcating loyalty to the authorities in the face of external threats (in this case ‘orange-ism’ rather than revolutionary nationalism). However, there are marked discontinuities also: the focus on pragmatism and economic modernisation, secularism and the selective adoption of democratisation rhetoric (albeit without acceptance of its liberal philosophical underpinnings). Altogether, this makes contemporary official nationality a far more ambiguous ideology than its forbears. As Easter (2008, p. 224) argues, the Russian state still sees itself as leading the nation down a unique Russian path, but now does so ‘without benefit of divine will or historical destiny’. Ultimately, the state tries to maintain its domestic and foreign policy autonomy from nationalism. But as a consequence, official nationalism lacks the mobilising and modernisation dynamism it pretends to. Moreover, its inherent vagueness about the nature of Russian distinctiveness provides broad parameters for social groups (especially religious and nationalist ones) to advance their own more concrete propositions in society at large (Verkhovsky 2006).

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<sup>8</sup> Information from Alexander Verkhovsky.

### **Cultural nationalism: reinforcing the primacy of civilisation**

However, when we turn from concept to execution, and observe how the Russian authorities actively seek to shape discussion of state and nation, we confront a less ambiguous picture. As several observers note, this is particularly marked in the state-run mass media, which propagates a 'civilisational nationalism' (Pain 2007; Laruelle 2007). Here, the discourse is far less about economic modernisation, pragmatism and Europeanism, and far more about emphases on Russian cultural, historical and spiritual distinctiveness. Indeed the view of Russia as a distinct civilisation inexorably but unwillingly drawn into a clash of civilisations with a West determined to divide and rule it has become 'politically correct' in Russian internal discourse.<sup>9</sup>

For example, one of the most obvious manifestations of 'civilisational' nationalism is the movement of formerly marginal extreme nationalists from the margins to the mainstream as now apparently 'respectable' public commentators: apart from the ever-present Vladimir Zhirinovskii, most mentioned is Dugin, whose ideas have received an appreciative audience in the highest political and military echelons, but Mikhail Leont'ev, Aleksandr Prokhanov, Sergei Kurginyan and Nataliya Narochitskaya are also prominent. Generally, such commentators do not expound in the media the full panoply of their views, which in some cases are imperialistic and even quasi-fascist, but all support views which reinforce an image of a Russia as a 'besieged fortress' under attack from anti-Western machinations (e.g. Umland 2007).

Similarly, political discussion on state-run channels such as Channel One either actively offers a strongly nationalist editorial line or fails significantly to challenge nationalist, racist or xenophobic prejudices. For example, the Channel One discussion programme *Sudite sami* ran post-election coverage of the US elections on November 6, 2008. Despite apparent pluralism (the show incorporated a range of domestic and foreign commentators), presenter Maxim Shevchenko summed up by dismissing the importance of American democratic procedures. In discussion of NATO on 5 December 2008 he concluded by accusing NATO of dismembering Yugoslavia and 'occupying' Iraq and Afghanistan. Similar views are expressed by such Channel One shows as *Moment istiny*, *K bar'eru* and many police/security themed serials (Zvereva 2007).

Michael Billig has famously distinguished between 'hot' or 'flagged' nationalism that appears more transparently in state symbols and projects, and 'banal' nationalism that encompasses 'unflagged' everyday, routinised

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<sup>9</sup> In Russia, as Jutta Scherrer (2008) argues, 'politically correct' often entails supporting state interests, and has little notion of social, moral acceptability.

and subtextual representations of the nation which penetrate mainstream discourse (Billig 1995). Channel One's nationalist discourse is an example of the blending of flagged (direct editorial comment) and unflagged, banal nationalism (ostensible pluralism that reinforces the nationalist editorial line). Several recent Russian films also promote a 'banal' civilisational nationalist consensus. For example, Andrei Kravchuk's 2008 film *Admiral*' (produced by Channel One) glorified Aleksandr Kolchak, a White Civil War leader briefly declared 'Supreme Governor of Russia' before being shot by the Bolsheviks. The film avoided discussion of both Red and White terrors (including 25,000 people allegedly killed by Kolchak's forces in one day), thus supporting the Kremlin's insistence that the Red and White streams in Russian history should be blended (itself a policy originally proposed by Aleksandr Prokhanov and Gennadii Zyuganov). It was even alleged that the lead actor Konstantin Khabenskii modelled Kolchak's mannerisms on Putin. The *St Petersburg Times* saw *Admiral*' as the 'latest in a series of historical epics that resurrect pre-revolutionary Russian heroes who battle bravely against impossible odds, dogged by foreign villains'.<sup>10</sup> Recent hyper-patriotic epics include *1612* (Nikita Mikhalkov, 2007), *Aleksandr. Nevskaya bitva* (Igor Kalenov, 2008) and *Taras Bulba* (Vladimir Bortko, 2009). The victory in the 2008 'Name of Russia' TV contest of Aleksandr Nevskii, the 13th century Russian prince who defeated Western invaders and helped re-orientate Russia eastwards, gave a similar impression (Stalin was third). Russia is hardly alone in producing nationalist 'historical' films of dubious accuracy (just see Mel Gibson's *Patriot*), but in context such portrayals merely buttress the civilisational nationalist consensus.

Other aspects of banal nationalism that reinforce a strongly conservative, if not reactionary, nationalist line and are actively encouraged by the state include the Putin leadership cult. Although this received a contemporary upgrade with the former president being presented as an austere business manager, the image of the benevolent Father-Tsar is never far away, and was even incorporated into Putin's December 2008 prime ministerial phone-in, when he invited the Varfolomeev family to celebrate New Year with him around the Kremlin Christmas tree. Although Easter (2008) argues that this mini-cult was largely sustained by unofficial popular and commercial forces, the stage-managed invocation of Putin as 'national leader' prior to elections in 2007-8 and again in 2011-12 indicates otherwise.

Furthermore, formerly extreme and marginal Russian nationalist axioms are now deeply intertwined with mainstream Russian political discourse. Words like *derzhava*, *Velikaya Rossiya* and *rusofobiya* that in the 1990s were the preserve of the so-called 'red-browns' are now prevalent (for example *rusofobiya* was popularised by Igor' Shafarevich with anti-Semitic undertones). Although the Kremlin itself rarely uses such overtly nationalistic words, its use of Aesopian terms like 'apples [liberals] and lemons [fascists] growing on the same branch' (Surkov) and more

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in [http://www.russiablog.org/2008/10/admiral\\_kolchak\\_russian\\_film\\_review.php](http://www.russiablog.org/2008/10/admiral_kolchak_russian_film_review.php), accessed 1 February 2009.

See also Liñán (2010).



direct allusions such as ‘foreign jackals’ and ‘comrade Wolf’ (Putin) invokes the same Stalinist discourse of foreign enemies and conspiracies, with the West (and the US in particular) as the hostile ‘Other’. Moreover, such a political discourse provides inadequate public understandings of nationalism and extremism that (as explored more below) make the Russian authorities ill-equipped to combat nationalist extremism. For example, many like the United Russia ideologue Ivan Demidov (quoted in Umland 2008) assert that ‘Russian’ and ‘fascism’ are antonyms. ‘Fascism’ is such a widely used political insult (for example regularly used against the Baltic States for their criticism of Soviet ‘occupation’) that it loses all concrete meaning. In general, the elite shares the Stalinist understanding that the Russian state cannot be itself nationalistic: its appropriation of nationalistic discourse is merely ‘patriotism’ (Voronkov and Karpenko 2007).<sup>11</sup>

More ‘flagged’ and obvious forms of cultural nationalism have included the state symbols: the adoption of the Soviet national anthem with new words and the Tsarist state symbols in 2000 was clearly intended to demonstrate the unity of Russian history and reinforce Putin’s view that a period of state consolidation had replaced communist and liberal revolutionism. But other aspects of the state’s attitude to its past have provoked widespread fears of selective re-Stalinisation, including the emphasis on military patriotism in schools (e.g. Laruelle 2009b). Above all, the ‘cult of victory’ in the Great Patriotic War, already important in the 1960s, was by 2009 more insistently than ever defended against those in the Baltics, Poland and Ukraine who do not see the Soviets as liberators.

A closer inspection of the regime’s view of history reveals it to be more ambiguous than many Western stereotypes, marking the veneration of elements of the Soviet and pre-Soviet past (particularly its geopolitical and military achievements) without open reverence for Stalin. However, as Vujacic argues (2007), Stalinism is the only ‘usable past’ in living memory for a state-builder, and attempts to praise Soviet achievements even selectively invariably risk Stalin’s rehabilitation. Moreover, the emphasis on ‘victory’ in WWII without discussion of Stalin’s mistakes and crimes increases this risk and without the active, systematic inculcation of a liberal conservatism, any pro-Soviet conservatism will have permanent bias towards illiberal motifs and symbols.

This ambiguity pervades regime views of the Soviet era. On one hand both Putin (and Surkov) have been highly critical of communist ideology, and often exhorted the Communist Party to social-democratise. On the other hand, although as a fan of Solzhenitsyn, Putin can by no means be seen as the secret Stalinist the liberal opposition claims, it took until October 2007 (on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the purges at Butovskii Poligon near Moscow where 20,000 were executed under Stalin) for Putin to commemorate the victims of Stalin publicly. In conditions of official

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<sup>11</sup> More nuanced understandings can be found in for example, Surkov (2006, p. 74) where he attacks ‘national isolationists’ as quasi-Nazis.

silence about Stalinism, a 'crypto-Stalinist' resurgence gained momentum, 'sometimes bashful, sometimes not very'.<sup>12</sup> For instance, the empathetic 40-part *Stalin.Live* serial shown on NTV in 2007 looked like a rehabilitation. In May 2009, Medvedev announced an Orwellian committee to combat the 'falsification of history' staffed by nationalists and pro-Kremlin officials rather than independent historians, while in August 2009 the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service's publication of documents defending the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact appeared to be a stellar example of the Kremlin propagating 'correct' (i.e. pro-Soviet) history.

One much-publicised element of alleged re-Stalinisation was a 2007 school history teaching manual (Filippov 2007). Although far from whitewashing the Soviet period, criticism of Stalin in particular is muted and his role as war leader, industrialiser and Bismarckian nation-builder is reinforced (Filippov 2007, pp. 81-94). The purges are neither quantified nor fully explained (the focus is on post-1945) and the volume even has a chapter on 'sovereign democracy' that presents the Putin period in glowing light. The text is however, one of many in use, and has had little impact on the school curriculum, although demands for a 'unified' history curriculum continue (Babich 2008).

An incipient de-Stalinisation has begun to muddy the picture significantly. It was initiated by Putin's September 2009 letter to *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which described the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact as 'immoral' and declared the NKVD's mass execution of Polish soldiers in Katyn in 1940 a 'crime'.<sup>13</sup> Previously, Putin had indicated that such issues were effectively closed by the USSR under Gorbachev. With Putin's commemoration of Katyn alongside Donald Tusk in March 2010, Medvedev's denunciations of Stalinism and totalitarianism (starting October 2009 and May 2010) the long-delayed showing of Andrzej Wajda's anti-Stalinist 2007 film *Katyn* on Russian television, it may well be that the authorities are realising that 'the well of Soviet nostalgia is running dry' and that post-economic crisis, their state-building and modernisation imperatives are best served by pragmatic rapprochement with the West.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it looks like the Kremlin is explicitly 'developing a "useable" past that promotes anti-Stalinism' in order to develop 'cultural and ideological supports for reform' (Sherlock 2011, p 93). However, since such imperatives are defined in such a top-

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<sup>12</sup> Alexei Makarkin, 'Govorit' pravdu-2', *Ezhednevnyi Zhurnal*, 7 May, available at: <http://ej.ru/?a=note&id=10080>, accessed 8 July 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Putin, "'Pages of History – Reason for Mutual Complaints or Ground for Reconciliation and Partnership?'" Article for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, available at: <http://www.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/3514.html>, accessed 3 October 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, 'The Well of Soviet Nostalgia Is Running Dry', *The Moscow Times*, January 20, available at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/the-well-of-soviet-nostalgia-is-running-dry/397760.html>, accessed 8 July 2010.

down way, they are prone to zig-zags and even reversals. As Alexei Makarkin argues: 'there is no guarantee that there the next renaissance of Stalinism will not occur when historical truth proves to be inconvenient and not in demand'.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, the Kremlin's view of the Soviet past partially recalls the standard Khrushchev and Brezhnev lines (an active inculcation of 'patriotic' symbols without the direct mention of Stalin, and focus on defects of Stalin's personality rather than the Stalinist system). What emerges is contradictory. On one hand the USSR is criticised as being an overly centralised bureaucracy dominated by obsolete ideology, and Russia's emergence from it an act of national self-determination (e.g. Surkov 2006, p. 48); on the other, it is portrayed as a continuation of Russia's victorious tradition of 1000-year old statehood. Whilst the Kremlin's views are far more nuanced than extreme nationalist opinions that the fall of USSR was engineered by a Western/Jewish/Masonic plot, they raise just as many questions.

Finally, despite the above-noted state commitments to multi-ethnicity and multi-confessionalism, the Russian Orthodox Church has been the main independent actor reinforcing the civilisational nationalist consensus. Church statements often support Russia's greatness and criticise the 'new world order' and human rights, emphasising community and concordance. Most notably in 2007, the World Council of Russian People refuted Western human rights doctrines, criticised liberal democracy and on future Patriarch Kirill's instigation approved the Russian Doctrine, a document outlining a neo-conservative and Orthodox Russian Idea.<sup>16</sup> Although some see the World Council as designed to provide a safety-valve for nationalist views within the Church (Mitrofanova 2005), its patronage by past and present Patriarchs cannot help but give its pronouncements semi-official status.

Moreover, the Church courted controversy by promoting the 'Foundations of Orthodox Culture' course as a compulsory weekly subject for all state school grades, and succeeded in doing so in several Russian regions.<sup>17</sup> Yet this was despite, not because of, the Kremlin's wishes (the Ministry of Education supported a 'Foundations of World Religions' course), and by 2007, firm opposition from intellectual circles and Russia's Muslim hierarchy had led to the Kremlin rejecting Church proposals and adopting voluntary teaching of multi-faith religion. Such initiatives from the Church can too easily be interpreted as direct attempts to increase its political influence and even to form a new state religion. However, much of the Church's opposition to Westernisation is motivated by a desire to resist secularisation, rather than liberalism *per se*, and (as noted above) the Church resists too close an association with the state. In turn,

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<sup>15</sup> Makarkin, 'Govorit' pravdu-2'.

<sup>16</sup> 'Russkaya doktrina: Sergievskii proekt', available at: [www.rusdoctrina.ru](http://www.rusdoctrina.ru), accessed 13 November 2008.

<sup>17</sup> 'Patchy local provision of Orthodox culture classes', *Forum 18 News Service*, available at: [www.forum18.org](http://www.forum18.org), 25 September 2007.

although the state promotes spirituality in order to strengthen social solidarity and patriotism, this is a ‘civil’ religion which includes other traditional confessions besides Orthodoxy (Mitrofanova 2005). Similarly, though all major Russian politicians court the Church, this is less a profession of faith than an exploitation of the Church’s cultural and national qualities – most Russian politicians probably privately endorse the comment attributed to Alyaksander Lukashenka: ‘I am an atheist but I am an Orthodox atheist’ (cited in Mitrofanova 2005, p. 133).

### **Political nationalism**

Overall, the Russian authorities are extremely ambivalent towards political nationalism – their policies opportunistically and inconsistently aim both to repress and stimulate nationalism (often simultaneously). The Kremlin appears to believe that it can organise and control a mass patriotic movement, a tendency which has roots in pro-police brigades in the Soviet era (Mitrokhin 2006). Although, according to Lilia Shevtsova (2007), the Kremlin appears to understand the risks of rhetoric and actions designed to mobilise populace by identifying enemies, and (as we have seen with cultural nationalism) tries to reduce it to symbolic actions and rhetoric, this is not often the effect. The belief that the ‘dark side’ of nationalism, including xenophobia and hate crimes, can be defeated essentially by depriving ultranationalists of control of the nationalist agenda constantly risks *creating* the demands which the Kremlin then has to control.

Certainly, the Kremlin has increasingly grown aware of the dangers of nationalism and extremism and spoken out against them (for example Putin’s December 2008 prime ministerial phone-in, and Medvedev’s statements on the 4 November 2008 Day of National Unity). It has long been relatively successful at marginalising extreme nationalists (for example by repeatedly denying registration to the Russian National Unity party). In 2006, it successfully split the national-populist *Rodina* bloc into a moderate wing (which joined the quasi-left Just Russia party, and then gained official patronage) and an extreme nationalist Great Russia party which was denied legal registration. Since 2007 the authorities have increasingly successfully prosecuted (some) perpetrators of hate crime, albeit at the cost of radicalising nationalists’ anti-regime sentiments.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, the Kremlin has proved simultaneously adept at stimulating political nationalism via its patronage of pocket nationalists like Zhirinovskii, Aleksandr Lebed’ and *Rodina*. Most noteworthy have been the plethora of ‘anti-orange’ youth groups such as *Nashi* and United Russia’s youth wing *Molodaya gvardiya*. On one hand, these attempt to

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<sup>18</sup> Galina Kozhevnikova, ‘Under the Sign of Political Terror. Radical Nationalism and Efforts to Counteract It in 2009’, available at: <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/2010/03/d18151>, accessed 8 July 2010.

promote a moderate nationalism and combat extremism and fascism.<sup>19</sup> On the other, they have a well-documented vigilante element and a tendency to indulge in extremist behaviour themselves: indeed the December 2010 anti-immigrant disturbances on Manezh Square allegedly involved individuals and groups with links to Kremlin-sponsored nationalist youth groups (Sherlock 2011). Nor are these groups' activities confined to domestic politics: *Nashi* activists carried out harassment campaigns against the British and Estonian ambassadors in 2006-7, and (allegedly) co-ordinated large-scale cyber-attacks on Estonian websites in 2007.<sup>20</sup> Analogous pro-Russian groups that defend the Kremlin's policies and Russian 'compatriots' have mushroomed in neighbouring countries – for instance, *Proryv* in Transnistria and groups of 'Russian citizens' in Crimea.

In general, the only thing consistent about the Kremlin's approach to political nationalism is its inconsistency, sometimes breathtaking. For example, *Rodina*'s removal from the 2005 Moscow Duma elections on the grounds of 'inciting racial hatred' was simply a smokescreen (its removal was on the initiative of the Liberal Democratic Party – ironically the first mainstream party to propagate the slogan 'Russia for the Russians'). Behind the decision was the Kremlin's concern that *Rodina* leader Dmitrii Rogozin was independently exploiting social discontent and might become a Russian 'Saakashvili' (i.e. a revolutionary nationalist). But Rogozin's 'extremism' did not prevent him being appointed Russian ambassador to NATO in 2006 – in this context he was seen as a stern defender of Russian interests! Similarly, the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) and its competitor Russian Image (*Russkii obraz*) have been the most dynamic manifestations of street-based xenophobia in recent years. Although both are increasingly subject to police harassment, there are allegations of co-option by state organs (e.g. Laruelle 2009b, p. 82). Certainly, the 'Russian March', which these street nationalists organise across Russia every 4 November, is prone to police interference and parallel demonstrations by pro-Kremlin youth, but its treatment by the authorities has been markedly tolerant in comparison with their repression of liberal opposition marches.

More instrumental still was United Russia's controversial nationalist 'Russian Project' (*Russkii proekt*), which promoted itself as an ideologist of civilisational nationalism and a discussion forum for answering the Russian question and defining Russian identity.<sup>21</sup> UR leaders openly declared that the forum was created to attract the electorate's chauvinistic sentiments (especially voters without a home since the prohibition of Great Russia). The project's website

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<sup>19</sup> 'Excerpts from transcript of meeting with members of Russian youth organisations', available at:

[http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2007/07/24/1048\\_type829](http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2007/07/24/1048_type829), accessed 7 January 2009.

<sup>20</sup> It was claimed that one of Duma deputy Sergei Markov's assistants led the attacks – see Clover (2009).

<sup>21</sup> For more see Umland (2008); Kholmogorova (2008); "Perezagruzka" "Russkogo proekta"?, available at:

<http://xeno.sova-center.ru/45A29F2/AD4A5DF28.03.2008> 15:30.

had links to nationalist internet resources of both moderate and radical orientation. Scandalous content included nostalgic reminiscences over Stalin's purges and calls for the creation of a Russian Orthodox 'Hizbollah'. The project leader Ivan Demidov (also leader of *Molodaya gvardiya*) publicly declared that he admired Aleksandr Dugin. However, *Russkii proekt* was downgraded as soon as it had no electoral utility, and its website was closed abruptly in February 2008. The site team admitted that the financing of patriotic projects was cut off after the elections because they spoiled the 'liberal' image of new President Medvedev. But far from being demoted, Demidov joined the presidential administration. *Russkii proekt* was merged into the 'State-Patriotic Club' within United Russia, aiming to promulgate a more moderate and 'respectable' conservative nationalism among pro-Kremlin circles (Laruelle 2009a). Moreover, although the most prominent pro-Kremlin youth groups such as *Nashi* were also downgraded after Medvedev's inauguration, they have continued to dabble in anti-immigrant national-populist rhetoric.<sup>22</sup>

In general, although the Kremlin has become increasingly concerned about the consequences of nationalism and xenophobia, legal efforts against extreme nationalists remain far weaker than the authorities' promotion of it. For according to Moscow's SOVA Centre: 'inappropriate anti-extremist enforcement [is] much more consistent than the appropriate enforcement'.<sup>23</sup> The primary reasons are: 1) xenophobia and prejudice of the authorities themselves; 2) the lack of mechanisms to ensure appropriate enforcement and to rule out absurd interpretations; 3) 'legal nihilism' or poor professionalism of the law-enforcement organs, who (despite the aforementioned recent improvements) consequently fail to enforce legislation consistently against truly dangerous ultra-nationalist activists, mass media and organisations.

As a consequence, extremism laws are consistently rather ambiguously formulated and target either irrelevant or simply the wrong 'extremists' and treat even mild political incorrectness as 'extremism', regardless of context. Among recent absurdities, in April 2010 the liberal news paper *Novaya Gazeta* was warned by *Rossvyazkomnadzor* (the government media regulator) for promoting nationalist views merely for publishing an interview with *Russkii obraz* leader Ilya Goryachev, despite the paper's stated intent to shed light on a violent organisation which it disliked.<sup>24</sup> More tragicomic still was a March 2008 anti-extremist warning issued by the Novosibirsk *oblast'* prosecutor's office to a war-gamer for displaying a white cross on a German tank in a re-enactment of a WWII tank battle. Although the white cross is still used to this day by German armed forces, the prosecutor's office deemed it a Nazi symbol, and did

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<sup>22</sup> Kozhevnikova, 'Under the Sign of Political Terror'.

<sup>23</sup> Galina Kozhevnikova, 'Spring-2008: Depression and Déjà Vu', available at: <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/B90F8C0>, accessed 03 October 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Interview available at: <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2010/005/02.html>, accessed 9 July 2010.

not retreat despite the mistake being drawn to its attention by the mass media, eventually fining one of the battle participants.<sup>25</sup>

All the above indicate that the Kremlin does not always directly instigate its nationalist excesses. However, the authorities' official nationality and prevalent 'civilisational nationalism' repeatedly give a 'demand from the top' for nationalist mobilisation in the context of a hierarchical political system with a long historical memory and inadequate safeguards. For example, Putin's October 2006 declarations about the need for regional authorities to 'protect the interests of Russian manufacturers and Russia's native population' in the country's outdoor markets were seen as a signal for harassment of immigrants by local officials and extreme nationalist groups alike. Moreover, the 'demand from the top' can lead to a 'demand from the bottom' which the Kremlin feels obliged to respond to: there is always a risk of losing the nationalist agenda. The 2006 and 2007 Kremlin disagreements with Georgia and Estonia were accompanied by a local nationalist mobilisation (including the expulsion of Georgian citizens and discrimination against ethnically Georgian Russian citizens) that were not discouraged by the Kremlin, but proved thoroughly counter-productive in terms of the Kremlin's international image.

Although in the aftermath of the 2008 Georgia-Russia conflict, the Kremlin took care to prevent similar reprisals against Georgian citizens within Russia, Medvedev's demands that the Georgian government respect the Russian government, its people *and values* indicated the increasing projection of a 'sense of grievance into its foreign policy' (Caryl 2009). Analysts will long debate the rationale for Russia's potentially highly risky recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but it is absolutely transparent that one key motivation was to mobilise domestic support behind the Kremlin with a systematic propaganda campaign (March 2011). An enthusiastic response from Russian nationalists such as Leont'ev and Dugin and the jingoistic echo in the Russian press (in particular the crude headline of 'Tak you' in the *Tvoi Den* tabloid on 27 August 2008, meaning 'same to you' but implying 'f\*ck you' to the West) indicated that the Kremlin was fully in synch with the Russian public. Nevertheless, Foreign Minister Lavrov was at pains to re-iterate that, despite the conflict with Georgia, the only ideology determining foreign policy was 'common sense and the supremacy of international law', not any revanchist imperialism (Lavrov 2008).

The Kremlin was initially frosty towards Barack Obama -- it seemed that a globally popular, eloquent, non-establishment and ethnic-minority president could not be accommodated within the dominant Russia paradigm about America's 'dual-standards' democracy (Gol'ts 2009). Nevertheless, the growing warmth of the 'reset' in Russia-US relations, alongside the aforementioned de-Stalinisation, does indicate that Russia's strategic interests in rapprochement with the West in order to further nuclear disarmament, economic and security co-operation are currently

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<sup>25</sup> Kozhevnikova, 'Spring-2008: Depression and Déjà Vu'.

trumping the Kremlin's practice of encouraging domestic anti-Americanism and civilisational nationalism. Nevertheless, the utility of the 'besieged fortress' strategy to domestic regime consolidation is likely to make fundamentally 'resetting' the Russia-West relationship protracted and problematic, and continue to make a more authentically nationalist foreign policy tempting, particularly if domestic economic problems recur.

## **Conclusion**

It is a vast simplification to see the Russian elite as inherently nationalistic: contemporary 'official nationality' is a state-centric ideology promoting a relatively moderate conservatism. This quasi-ideology sees Russia as part of European geography and culture, although politically and historically distinct. Its 'nationalism' is moderate in terms of its emphasis on modernisation not anti-modernism, Europe not Eurasia, secularism not the Third Rome and pragmatism not ideological conflict. Officially, the emphasis is on a civic nationalism with an emphasis on Russian citizenship in a multinational state rather than on ethnic or cultural heritage. It is neither expansionist, aggressive nor imperial. Although it promotes a competitive and realist view of the world, its main emphasis is Russia's right to pursue its national interests autonomously of external interference. The guiding aim is internal and external stability and the preservation of elite power. Ivan Krastev argues (2007) that the regime project is not based on mobilising but controlling ethnic Russian nationalism and using it selectively when necessary. This is half-true: the intention to control is there, the execution not always so efficient.

However, despite its relatively moderate content, official nationality relies on thoroughly traditional rationales and methods of agitprop. For domestic legitimacy, electoral success and social mobilisation, the regime repeatedly employs less moderate forms of nationalism which it must continually encourage, contain and co-opt. These forms of nationalism portray the Russian authorities as the only force preventing national destruction and foster a 'rally-round-the flag' effect against external enemies. Despite the official preference for an 'enlightened' patriotism, the Kremlin provides few safeguards against an unenlightened nationalism. As we have seen, this results partly from the weakness of legal mechanisms and training, but the broader question is whether the Kremlin can have a civic nationalism without a civil society, a liberal nationalism without liberalism? There is every reason to think not. Emil' Pain (2007) argues too categorically that Russia has no citizens but only subjects, yet makes a valid argument that in the absence of free public discussion, the legitimate questioning of official positions, the promotion of liberal rights and freedoms, or anti-racist education, the means to censure or educate those with real extremist views are absent. The nationalism that emerges will always be biased towards conservative and imperial discourses and against a genuinely liberal



nationalism. The Kremlin's thinking appears to be that the Russian authorities are more liberal than the majority of the public and so nationalism must be channelled and not contested. But this approach continually addresses the symptoms and not the cause.

For the outside world, this has ambiguous implications. On one hand, views such as Lucas' are pure hyperbole: Russia is not consistently promoting an aggressive, assertive, neo-imperialist policy of fundamentally challenging the post-Cold war international system motivated by a fundamentally different system of national values. Moreover, viewing Russia's policies as invariably driven by an irrational, aggressive nationalism neatly sidesteps the question of whether Russia's 'assertiveness' actually has some rationale. Though Western policy is not the focus of this article, I certainly agree that if there is a 'Russia problem', then there is a 'West problem' too (Sakwa 2008a). Western policies have certainly created an environment where the Russian elite can readily portray the nation as isolated, victimised and threatened, even if the Kremlin milks this environment opportunistically. That most nationalistic rhetoric is for domestic use is shown by persistent attempts to contain the more isolationist civilisational nationalism within the domestic cultural sphere, and to subordinate political nationalism to short-term domestic political imperatives. Even though Russia does have an emergent ideology that lays heavy rhetoric on national distinctiveness, this argues less in cultural-historical than purely pragmatic terms, and is vague in the extreme. Although Medvedev's 'liberalism' is definitely questionable, the emergence of officially-endorsed liberal views that refute the rhetoric and implications of sovereign democracy indicates that the national idea remains contested territory.<sup>26</sup>

This is not to say that Russia's nationalism is a benign influence on the world arena. As Monaghan (2008) notes, Russia has moved from defensive reaction to Western initiatives towards a more assertive position that at least potentially might act as an alternative 'value centre' to Western liberal democracy. Although Russia claims to share values with Europe, such as democracy, civil society, the rule of law and civic nationalism, it clearly defines their substance and priority very differently (especially giving scant regard role to liberalism, individualism and human rights). Moreover, some members of the elite envisage this difference as a motor of confrontation; notably, Sergei Karaganov (2007) sees Russia at the centre of a new competitive struggle between liberal-democratic and authoritarian models of capitalism that will determine the world's future. Precisely because the clash is less about having different values than presenting alternative versions of the same values (cf. Krastev 2007), Russia and the West are doomed to talk past each other when they appear to be speaking the same language. Yet, the likelihood that this will prove to be a

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<sup>26</sup> E.g. *Demokratiya: Razvitie Rossiiskoi modeli* (Moscow, TsPT 2008). This report, part-authored by the Medvedev-linked Institute of Contemporary Development, sees the specificity of the Russian model in certain *institutional* features (e.g. a strong executive presidency), while arguing that the basic principles of democracy are universal.

fundamental existential challenge to the West rather than a profound source of friction is still rather remote, because although Moscow displays an increasing desire to establish Russia as an international role model, it is clearly hesitant to develop an ideological project that cuts itself off entirely from Western models (and investment) or one that relies in any significant way on the discourse of civilisational nationalism that it adopts in its domestic policy.

Nevertheless, it remains an open question as to whether Russia's instrumental and inconsistent nationalism makes it a more problematic partner for the West than, for example, China, whose illiberal nationalism is relatively constant. In contrast, Russia oscillates between more co-operative and truculent positions, motivated by its desire to be a sovereign, semi-detached but equally respected part of Europe, with the need to play the gallery at home being paramount.

That democratising nationalism is potentially more conflictual than that of consolidated authoritarian states is no news to theorists of nationalism, who have argued that an exclusionary nationalism allows semi-democratic elites 'to rule in the name of the nation [without being] fully accountable to its people' (Snyder 2000, p. 45). From this perspective, even if the Kremlin outlines a moderate, controlled nationalism that underpins its official doctrines, its persistent habits of exploiting less benign public phobias and complexes perhaps provides the basis for a 'tide of populist nationalism' (Shevtsova 2007). As Sakwa notes, Russian popular anti-Americanism ebbs and flows, but after each ebb the residual level remains ratcheted up (Sakwa 2008a).

However, given the state's control over organised political life in general, there is little immediate prospect of a 'red and brown' revolution by nationalist movements that some Kremlin-connected analysts envisage if the state lost its monopoly of the nationalist political agenda (Nikonov 2006), still less of a Weimar-style victory of extremists through the ballot box. Rather, the risk is either of localised and sporadic ethnic clashes prompted by these Kremlin-sponsored phobias, particularly in the context of economic distress, or of the gradual contamination of 'official nationality' by civilisational nationalism as the Kremlin responds to demands it has done so much to create. The 2008 foreign policy doctrine, which for the first time indicated that 'global competition is acquiring a civilisational dimension' (*Kontsepsiya* 2008) indicated this process. The selection of the 'liberal' Medvedev as Russia's new president in 2008 indicates at least that the Kremlin still prefers a patina of Westernising pragmatism to more confrontational, even nationalist sentiments of alternatives such as former Minister of Defence Sergei Ivanov. Yet, unless the Kremlin more actively and consistently promulgates and defends the moderate, civic nationalism its official nationality ostensibly aspires to, 'enlightened patriotism' will remain much more an aspect of self-serving elite rhetoric than the daily cultural and political experience, either of Russia's citizens or its international interlocutors.

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